



The Castle School

A SPECIALIST COLLEGE FOR COMMUNICATION & INTERACTION

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MINUTES of a Meeting of the Full Governing Board held on Thursday 20th March 2025 at 5.00pm, Held at Castle Post-16

Present: Helen Cabell (HC) (Chair) (Co-opted Governor), Nicola Markham (NM) (Vice Chair) (Co-opted Governor), Jo Davis (JD) (Staff Governor), Adrian Crawford (AC) (Parent Governor), Chris Fisher (CF) (Co-opted Governor), Indira Hann (JH) (Co-opted Governor), Jon Hewitt (JH) (Headteacher), Charlie Kowalski (CK) (Parent Governor), Emily Owles (EO) (Co-opted Governor), Jane Seymour (JS) (Co-opted Governor)

In attendance: Caroline Whitlock (CW) (Deputy Head), James Whybra (JW) (Deputy Head), Atul Attra (AA) (School Business Manager), Anne Hunter (AH) (Clerk)

1. Apologies Received

Apologies for absence were received from William Alexander and Indira Hann arrived late. The meeting was quorate.

2. Declarations of Interest on Items Pertaining to this Agenda

There were no declarations of interest declared.

3. Any Other Business Items to be Raised at this Meeting

The following items of business were raised:

- CW wished to provide early oversight of the results of the parent survey which was due to close tomorrow.
- JH reported that the Clerk had advised that policies did not require a proposer or seconder therefore in future policies would be considered, discussed and then voted on.

4. Minutes from the Last Meeting, 14th November 2024, and Matters Arising

The minutes of the meeting held on 14th November 2024 were agreed as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chair.

Actions arising from the previous meeting were discussed as follows:

- AH confirmed that prior to any election taking place Chairs and Vice Chairs could be voted annually or for a period decided by the Governing Board. It was noted that the period could not be any longer than the elected person's term of office. It was proposed that this would be discussed at the Governors' Strategy Session in June.
Action 1 – The Clerk to add Chairs and Vice Chairs' period of office to the agenda of the Governors' Strategy Session.
- The committee membership of the three newly appointed Governors was noted.
- The Chair stated that training would be picked up during Item 9.

5. Committee Reports

The committee chairs provided the following updates in relation to their last meetings:

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- **Curriculum Committee held on 30th January 2025**

NM advised of the policies that had been considered at the meeting and advised that a change had been put forward to the Attendance Policy. Given that minutes were written by different authors NM queried how any actions would be taken forward? JH confirmed that this action may have been missed but in future actions would be listed out and taken forward by the Clerk.

NM informed the meeting that in relation to safeguarding a Section 147 audit had been completed with the pastoral teams at both sites and sent to the LA. It was noted that 1,250 My Concerns had been raised since September which was on par with the last academic year.

During discussion about Arts Mark it was noted that the School was due to receive £10,000 from Cirrus Logic for creative arts. JH mentioned that this was the second time the school had been awarded this amount. JW advised that they were reviewing how this funding would be used. NM reported that discussions had been held on tribunals and placements and the fact that the school was currently receiving placement requests from a large number of local authorities including Oxfordshire, Surrey, Swindon and other Berkshire areas. JH stated that it was expected that 500 consultations would be received this academic year. HC asked whether given the large number was there a need to consider the provision of admin support to assist with this task? JH didn't believe this was necessary and explained the process and the fact that following the DfE's review of net capacity, which stated that the net capacity of the School was 200 over all three sites. JH felt that that this figure could be used to assist the refusal of places.

Indira Hann joined the meeting at 5.15pm

HC queried whether in terms of work and time this was the best use of JH's time and whether additional people should be trained up? JH explained that he had the expertise and attending tribunals provided him with an understanding of what was going on elsewhere. JH believed that the current system was not fit for purpose and therefore was likely to change. HC said that we should review this again in the future.

NM drew Governors' attention to discussions that had been held about the age range at Castle at Theale and the intention to only accommodate children up to Year 10. JH clarified that there would be a legacy group of students who would continue at the School and everyone else would continue to Year 9 and finish at age 16. It was noted that this had been agreed with WBC. CW confirmed that if any additional children joined Year 10 or 11 they would also join the legacy group.

Governors had been advised that four new classrooms would be built on the site of the old caretaker's bungalow which were due for completion in January 2026. JH explained that additional students had been taken the previous September who would eventually be accommodated in the new classrooms and the number on role was currently 227 across all sites. No additional children would be taken in January.

NM advised that the current high needs banding had been in place since 2013. Helen Redding was currently leading on a banding review.

- **Staffing Committee held on 30th January 2025**

NM informed the meeting that staffing levels were much better and Love Lane and Post-16 were fully staffed. Castle at Theale currently had a few vacancies which were being advertised.

CW advised that staff had been discussing how to support children with SEMH and how they could assist the main school banding exercise. JH stated that they were seeing a lot of Covid born children with SEMH issues and it was difficult to know whether they had a special need or it was just gaps in development.

NM advised that the Committee had agreed that the Safer Recruitment Policy should be changed in line with advice from Judicium, the company that provided the School with HR support. FGB was therefore asked to ratify the current policy. As stated at the meeting JH would then work with Judicium and the School's HR Officer to create a new policy to be considered at the next Staffing Committee.

- **Finance Committee held on 23rd January 2025**

AC reported that information was provided by AA on the catering contract. AA gave a further update and advised Governors that the closing date for tenders was today and groups of schools would be assessing the tenders against a set criteria from tomorrow. There would then be a meeting next week to go through the various assessments of the tender.

JH advised that all staff would be using BromCom, the School's new MIS contractor, from next Monday. AA reported that there had been a few niggles but on the whole the system was working well.

With regard to the cleaning contract AA advised that it was intended to go out to tender in October once the new classrooms were built. Other schools who had gone out to tender were finding it difficult to get contractors. IH asked if the School set its own terms and conditions. AA responded that WBC's legal department were used to produce the contract, which included their standard terms and conditions. IH offered to assist if any help was required.

AC confirmed that discussions had been held about Delivering Better Value (DBV) and SEN banding and it was reiterated that the banding exercise was about clarity rather than a cost saving exercise. Following a query from HC about the timeline for the review AA confirmed that the exercise was due to be completed by the end of this year but the new bands would not come into effect until the 2026-27 financial year. JW confirmed that the School was challenging Helen Redding on some of the bandings that were being proposed. JH made the point that every time the School made a challenge Helen agreed with their reasoning.

AC also confirmed that the draft SFVS had been discussed at the meeting.

During discussion of the Finance Report CK had queried the impact of the new NI charges due to come into effect on 1st April. AA confirmed that he would be providing information on this at the next Finance Committee meeting. As well as looking at the various budgets in detail other issues had been covered under the Finance Report, including the crossing charging for the Theale site to ensure that the true costs were known. AC stated that the Committee was advised that a carry forward of £325k was expected compared to £596k last year. This underspend was below the 10% clawback figure. It was noted that Will Harvey was the link with Friends of Castle.

- **Premises Committee held on 23rd January 2025**

With regard to current projects JH advised that an area of the Donnington playground (Primary) was falling away and confirmed that whilst the building's skirt had come away however it was believed to be secure and was included in the Capital Maintenance Programme. EO informed Governors that WBC was due to look at all maintained schools' modular buildings. HC asked that the matter of the playground be picked up at the next Premises Committee meeting and reported back to FGB.

Action 2 – The Premises Committee to consider the matter of the playground at its next meeting and report back to FGB. The Clerk to add this to the Premises agenda.

It was confirmed that there were no health and safety concerns. Governors were reminded that a "walk round" of one of the sites should be undertaken each term.

Action 3 – The Clerk to schedule a "walk round" of one of the sites each term.

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6. Headteacher's Report

All Governors were sent JH's detailed Headteacher's Report prior to this meeting and JH asked if Governors had any questions. The following questions and comments were raised:

- JH highlighted that the staff list didn't include the new Pastoral and Behaviour Lead towards the end of the report.
- AC queried why the properties of the report state 2007? JH agreed to look into this.
- AC asked that the table in para 4.2 should state that the suspension length related to days and the typo in para 4.4 (Souith) should be amended.
- AC queried if "a review of the STP 2023-3024", in para 5.1, was actually the correct year. JH confirmed it was correct as it was last year's STP that was being reviewed.
- Following a query as to why some of the annual financial reports of the Friends of Castle (FOC) were missed during Covid (as stated in para 5.3) AA confirmed that this was because at that time the committee had disbanded and there was no one to produce the annual reports. AC asked what the value was of the FOC funds and AA agreed to find out. It was noted that the FOC were due to hold their Summer Fete on 21st June.
Action 4 – AA to find out what the value of FOC funds were and advise AC.
- JS queried whether the attendance figure of 88.7%, as shown in para 1.1, related to children or sessions. JG explained that this figure related to the overall attendance of children over the whole year based on the number of sessions. The attendance figure for mainstream secondary schools was on average 90% and 87% for special schools. JS queried if the figures showed any particular trends? JW confirmed that attendance was monitored on a weekly basis and from that any trends would be picked up. Most of the absences were linked to medical issues and CW advised that there was a lot of mental health absences at CAT.
- Following a query JH confirmed that he didn't fine parents for their children's absences? JH stated that when requests were received to take children out of school in term time he always asked for detailed information to be provided. He cited examples of parents having to take their children on holiday in term time as it was too busy for the child during school holidays or those who were gifted holidays from charities and often didn't have any choice on when these had to be taken.
- AC pointed out that on page 7 the wording "Please Appendix" was stated which didn't make sense.
- HC queried whether the number of racial abuse incidents, as shown as 14 in para 4.6, was an increase on previous figures? JH confirmed that there hadn't been an increase in actual incidents, but the system now provided better and clearer reporting. All incidents were now reported and had been dealt with according to the Behaviour Policy.
- In response to a query from HC CW confirmed that CAT was currently recruiting for two teachers and would be recruiting for two TAs in the summer.
- AC highlighted the stability of staffing at the School. JH advised that a number of schools, particularly in the east of the county, were having to use a large number of agency staff. AC commented that the School had done really well to retain staff.

7. Policies for Ratification

Having been submitted to the relevant committees, the following policies were considered:

- Admissions – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Attendance

NM advised that the Curriculum Committee had requested that any mention of "natural parents" should be amended to read "birth parents". The policy was agreed and ratified by FGB subject to the change requested by the Curriculum Committee.

- Curriculum – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Intimate Care – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB

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- SEND – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Capability

JH highlighted that this was the LA's policy that was being considered. The policy was agreed and ratified by FGB.

- Safer Recruitment

JH reminded Governors that this policy was being recommended for adoption now with a view to a revised policy being brought to the next Curriculum Committee meeting. – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB.

Action 5 – The Clerk to add Safer Recruitment Policy to the next Curriculum Committee Agenda

- Anti-Fraud and Corruption – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Anti-Money Laundering – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Bribery Act – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Charging and Remissions – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Financial Management – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB
- Governor Visits

JH stated that this Policy would be discussed further at the Governors' Strategy Session in June. The policy was agreed and ratified by FGB.

Action 6 – The Clerk to add Governor Visits to the Governors' Strategy Session agenda.

- Health and Safety – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB.
- Non-Smoking – the policy was agreed and ratified by FGB.

Action 7 – The Clerk to make the amendment to the Attendance Policy as requested and file the agreed policies in the relevant paper file and on GovernorHub

8. Safeguarding Update and Signing of the Single Central Record

CW reported that she had met with NM prior to today's meeting and drew Governor's attention to the information contained in para 4.1 of the Headteacher's report. CW advised that over 1,600 safeguarding concerns had been raised on MyConcerns, most of which were low level concerns. All concerns were triaged by the Deputy Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), who initially responded to the concerns and decided what category the concern came under. HC asked whether any trends could be seen from the concerns? JH advised that staff were instructed to report all minor concerns and from that trends could be seen i.e. if it was found that a number of concerns had been raised by several members of staff.

AC queried whether any particular category of concern appeared more than others and asked if a summary of the categories and numbers per category could be provided. It was agreed that this would be provided. CW clarified that it was the deputy DSL's judgement as to which category was used and sometimes a concern might fall into two categories.

Action 8 – JH to provide Governors with the categories of safeguarding concerns and the numbers per category.

AC queried what the splits were across sites and how the DSL ensured that all staff were reporting concerns? CW confirmed that she looked at class groups and if there were any that were not reporting then she would check with the relevant staff. MyConcern was a very powerful tool and information could be pulled off the system in many ways including by class or child. Following a query by IH JH confirmed that AI tools were not utilised, and the system was completely locked.

Currently there were two students who were the subject of Child Protection Plans.

NM informed the meeting that she had not yet had the opportunity to sign-off the Single Central Record (SCR) but would be doing so in the near future. AA advised that new staff checks were being completed and the records highlighted were to do with outstanding training. Concern was raised about what would happen if Cassy Clark, who administered the

SCR, was not available and it was confirmed that there was a process in place for this eventuality. JD reported that staff were very vigilant and anyone coming to the School for the first time had to provide relevant documents eg taxi drivers had their badges checked on a regular basis.

9. Governance and Training

- **SFVS Sign-Off**

AC reported that the SFVS had been through the Finance Committee and reviewed by the Chair. It was agreed that the SFVS could be signed off and forwarded to the LA.

- **Review of Standing Orders of the Governing Board 2024-2025**

AH confirmed that as the matter about the Chairs and Vice Chairs' terms of office had been clarified she had updated the document with the current membership of the various committees. AH's intention was to review this further for the next academic year. The Standing Orders were agreed and adopted.

10. AOB items

- **Parent Survey**

CW reported that the parent survey was due to close tomorrow and so far 43 parents had responded which was very pleasing. CW went through some of the initial findings which were hugely positive and included that 94% of parents were happy with the School and 92% stated that their children felt safe in school. CW also highlighted that in relation to the question around PSHE provision a small number of parents had stated that they were not clear on what was provided. It was noted that further information would be provided at the next FGB meeting.

Action 9 – The Clerk to add the results of the Parent Survey to the next FGB agenda.

- **Governor Training**

The three newly appointed Governors confirmed that they had completed their prevent and safeguarding training. The Clerk was asked to arrange New Governor Training sessions for JS, EO and CF and Finance Training for EO and also provide the three Governors with access to GovernorHub. It was noted that the training sessions may not be available until the new academic year.

Action 10 – The Clerk to organise New Governor Training sessions for JS, EO and CF and Finance Training for EO and provide access to GovernorHub.

12. Dates and times of the next FGB meetings

Finance and Premises Committees – Thursday 3rd April 2025, 4.30pm on Teams

Budget Sign Off – Thursday 24th April 2025 4.30pm on Teams

Governors' Strategy Session – Tuesday 10th June 2025 at 3.30pm in person at Post-16

Full Governing Board – Thursday 3rd July 2025 at 5.00pm in person at Love Lane

The meeting closed at 6.40pm